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INTELLIGENCE STUDY

THE SINO-VIETNAMESE EFFORT TO LIMIT
AMERICAN ACTIONS IN THE VIETNAM WAR
(POLO XX)

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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W A R N I N G

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**THE SINO-VIETNAMESE EFFORT TO LIMIT
AMERICAN ACTIONS IN THE VIETNAM WAR**

This is a working paper of the DD/I Research Staff. It deals with one aspect of Peiping's relations with Hanoi in the context of the war in Vietnam and is a follow-up to an earlier Staff memorandum [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] on differences between Chinese and Vietnamese views on strategy for the prosecution of the war.

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The writer of this paper [REDACTED] has found useful material in the published weekly analysis of the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. The DD/I/RS would welcome comment addressed to the writer [REDACTED]

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**THE SINO-VIETNAMESE EFFORT TO LIMIT
AMERICAN ACTIONS IN THE VIETNAM WAR**

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THE SINO-VIETNAMESE EFFORT TO LIMIT
AMERICAN ACTIONS IN THE VIETNAM WARSummary

When the Viet Cong was re-activated in 1958-59, neither Peiping nor Hanoi seemed to estimate that the American commitment to Saigon would develop to the point at which territory in the North would be subjected to air strikes. In their discussion of the war in 1960-62, they emphasized that the American effort in the South was "special warfare," i.e., of a very limited character. As American military support of South Vietnam increased, the Chinese became increasingly concerned, and by 1964 they underscored a Sino-Vietnamese community of interest in trying to deter Washington from making air strikes against the North. However, they were at pains to ensure that Washington would not calculate that PLA forces were poised to enter Vietnam or Laos (and, therefore, would not feel impelled to strike by air at the China mainland). The U.S. air strikes on North Vietnam in August 1964 almost certainly took the Chinese and Vietnamese leaders by surprise. By February-March 1965, their failure to prevent strikes against the North forced them to recognize that Mao was wrong in thinking that small wars could be fought with only slight risks to the base areas and to the security of other Eloc countries.

Once the concept of sanctuary for the North had been invalidated, the Chinese were apparently stimulated to add a new dimension to their encouragement of Hanoi. That is, in addition to encouraging the North Vietnamese to move the fighting in the South from primarily guerrilla warfare (with occasional big battles of annihilation) to primarily conventional warfare (with many big battles of annihilation), the Chinese apparently began urging the North Vietnamese to infiltrate PAVN forces into the South on a larger scale. Hanoi, evidently reluctant to comply to the extent advocated by Peiping in early 1965, may now be somewhat more willing to do so, in the sense of being willing to infiltrate a few more PAVN units. However, the Chinese seem to be sustaining their pressure for large-scale infiltration or even direct attacks across

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the 17th parallel. The Chinese almost certainly would increase their pressure on Hanoi if American air strikes were to hit targets north of the 20th parallel and were to include more economic installations.

Considerably increased awareness of the threat to the China mainland apparently has impelled the Chinese leaders to state publicly the conditions under which they would use the PLA to intervene. There seem to be two conditions for definite intervention. PLA ground forces will enter the fighting if (a) the United States moves large forces of its own ground troops across the 17th parallel and (b) the North Vietnamese prove unable to handle the matter and request Chinese assistance. Were the United States to strike by air at bases in China but not move its troops on the ground into the North, PLA ground forces might be committed to Vietnam. This last part of the Chinese position contains a large element of ambiguity, particularly on the matter of what constitutes an American "attack" against the mainland. The Chinese have declared "If we are attacked, we will certainly counterattack," but they have been equivocal on the matter of whether air strikes against the mainland would spur them to counterattack with the PLA on the ground, or whether air strikes against the mainland would meet merely with a counter air strike (or air defense action).

The Chinese certainly prefer to prevent such American air strikes against their bases. Their options, however, are limited because of their (Mao's) pugnacity and refusal to concede that the small war will not work in Vietnam. They seem to believe that it will still work--that is, that, accepting a larger risk to the North Vietnamese base area and to China than originally foreseen, Communist forces can still pursue the war effectively in South Vietnam, probably without provoking the U.S. into (a) moving its ground forces into North Vietnam on a large scale, or (b) making air attacks on China. Therefore, the Chinese will not desist from encouraging Hanoi and the Viet Cong from continuing the war. They seem to be willing to risk, if necessary, even the destruction of their bases in South China to sustain the war.

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**THE SINO-VIETNAMESE EFFORT TO LIMIT
AMERICAN ACTIONS IN THE VIETNAM WAR**

Introduction

As early as 1958, at the time of the Taiwan Strait crisis, the Chinese leaders were apparently aware that the Soviet nuclear umbrella was credible only for the defense of the USSR, not for a Chinese or North Vietnamese military effort. By 1960, intensification of the Sino-Soviet dispute made this awareness even clearer. Nevertheless, the Chinese and North Vietnamese leaders probably viewed the removal of the Soviet nuclear umbrella --in an earlier period a credible restraint on American military action in the Far East--as a development which would not, and should not, prevent the guerrilla war in the South from moving ahead. They seemed to agree that some other deterrent to American action against North Vietnam could be found, and their view centered on PAVN and PLA forces as constituting an adequate (or credible) deterrent.

The Chinese leaders have hinted at the conditions in which they would feel impelled to commit PLA forces to fight in Vietnam. This paper examines the record of Chinese hints and direct statements on this matter in the context of Peiping's and Hanoi's effort to deter the United States from (a) increasing advisory and material military aid to Saigon, (b) striking by air at the North, and (c) striking even at China.

Ambiguity in a statement of deterrence sustains political maneuverability, but reduces credibility. A deterrent statement can be both ambiguous and strong only when military dispositions indicate a real threat. That is, the degree of seriousness of the threat cannot be measured by the content of verbal warnings alone.

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Nevertheless, verbal warnings can provide indicators of intentions even without hard information on military dispositions. In our view, a deterrent statement acquires strength from the degree of precision used in (a) committing a country to take direct military actions and (b) closing off avenues of retreat after the specific public commitment is made. Adjectives do not make a deterrent statement strong or weak, nor do analogies with earlier clashes.

In the following analysis, all of the underlining of words and passages has been supplied.

1. To Deter the United States from Increasing Military Aid

In 1960 and 1961, the Chinese leaders avoided making any public statements indicating direct PLA support for the future defense of the North, but hinted, imprecisely, at Peiping's concern in the matter. Typical of the locutions they used were those contained in Chou En-lai's remarks to the North Vietnamese delegation in Peiping: the Chinese government and people "cannot be indifferent" to the grave situation created by American actions in the South, and the Chinese and Vietnamese governments have always been "in close cooperation and supported each other" in building socialism and opposing the United States (statements made on 12 June 1961). Later, in alluding publicly to American "plans to send troops" to the South, Peiping did not go beyond committing "the heroic people of South Vietnam" to react to this new challenge (broadcast of 12 October 1961).

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Even when the Chinese leaders implied the possible use of the PLA in a joint military effort with Hanoi, it was to be a joint action to defend "separate" (ko-tzu) countries. That is, it was vague on the matter of PLA use in Vietnam: the Chinese people and "the PLA...will make joint efforts with you to defend the security of our separate countries"

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And when this unprecedented (and not repeated) statement of joint defense and other efforts proved to be inadequate to prevent the establishment of the American military command in the South (in February 1962), the Chinese avoided references to any PLA involvement in defense of the North. They were not explicit on their course of action when they warned that the American military command posed "a serious threat to the security of the DRV and China" and that Washington intended to move first against the North and "from there against China" (People's Daily editorial of 25 February).*

2. To Deter the United States from Air Strikes Against the North

Peiping and Hanoi probably estimated in 1962 and 1963 that the establishment of the American military command would not lead to American air attacks on the

*In this editorial, the Chinese repeated what they had said in their government statement of 24 February for the first time--e.g., American action in the South "seriously affects the security of China." The North Vietnamese had established the line earlier and for the first time in their government statement of 18 February that American action was "a direct threat to the security of the DRV." The Chinese government statement ducked the matter of PLA involvement and made a careful distinction between the "direct" threat to the DRV and the "indirect" threat to China.

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North.* They seemed to believe that the United States would restrict its military assistance to support below the 17th parallel and were probably confirmed in this view by Washington's references to the limited nature of its action and the need to fight guerrilla wars with (a) "special warfare" rather than with the more extensive (b) "local" warfare or even (c) nuclear warfare.**

However, by early 1964, the Chinese and North Vietnamese leaders displayed real concern about the prospects of American air strikes. In February, NCNA carried American press references to discussions in Washington of air attacks which might be directed against the North, and Hanoi stepped up its deterrent statements. Defense Minister Giap called for the improvement of "combat cohesion of the armed forces of socialist countries" (Soviet Red Star article of 23 February 1964), and the North Vietnamese army paper warned the United States--which "is planning" to increase "provocations" against the North--that the

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**These terms are not precise but seem consistently in Chinese usage to indicate an ascending order. They refer, in order, to a small operation like the U.S. effort in South Vietnam, a larger one such as the Korean war, and a world war. The Russians have a comparable usage. The People's Daily editorial of 25 February 1962 mentioned all three types in connection with American strategic military thought and stressed Washington's use of (a) in Vietnam. Other Chinese and North Vietnamese articles discussed (a) as the prevailing type of American-supported warfare in the South. (Only on 10 May 1965 did a Chinese leader--Lo Jui-ching--state explicitly that the U.S. was moving in the direction of the more extensive "local" war.)

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PAVN is stronger than ever and "together with the strength of the peoples and armed forces of the friendly countries in the socialist camp--which support us closely--our strength is second to none" (Quan Doi Nhan Dan article of 3 March). (The 3 March article strongly suggested that only "friendly" China, rather than the USSR, was willing to support the DRV "closely.") Hanoi's concern was also reflected in private contacts; for the first time, diplomatic channels were used to warn Washington. A North Vietnamese official told

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in mid-February 1964 that if the United States were to introduce more forces and equipment into the South, the Communist side could easily match such increases. He went on to say that Hanoi was prepared to deal with the possibility that Washington might carry the war to the North (apparently a reference to air strikes). Also in mid-February, the North Vietnamese increased military and civilian defense preparations against anticipated American air attacks.

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At the same time, the Chinese were careful to avoid identifying Peiping in any direct military sense with Hanoi's defense effort. For example, when Hanoi discussed a hypothetical "invasion" of the North by American ground forces and then referred to the consequence--viz., that the United States "would have to cope not only with North Vietnam, but also with China" (Hoc Tap article of January 1964)--the Chinese omitted this key passage in their reprint. Reflecting Chinese uncertainty of the extent of prospective American action, Peiping's statement of deterrence in early March was so cautious as to be tantamount to a mere repetition of Hanoi's mild warning that "any infringement on the DRV" would be the "responsibility" of the United States (People's Daily editorial of 4 March). While the Chinese were short on specific commitments regarding PLA action, they were long on encouragement. A Chinese "peace" statement of early March declared that "American clamors to extend the war to the North can only frighten those who have lost their nerve," i.e., the Russian leaders.

Hanoi's concern about prospective American air strikes on the North continued through the spring of 1964. On 9

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May, General Giap, in an interview with the Communist newsman W. Burchett, the content of which was intended for Western leaders, reflected some anxiety on the part of the leadership when he warned that "any act of aggression against the DRV by the United States...would be suicide." Under Chinese and North Vietnamese criticism at a press conference in Hanoi, Soviet Ambassador Tovmasyan revealed on 15 May that: "A cadre of the DRV's Ministry of Foreign Affairs told me that the Vietnamese people do not see the danger of a direct attack by the United States." (Tovmasyan's apparent point was that if the real North Vietnamese estimate minimized the prospect of an air strike, why should Vietnamese newsmen demand to know if there would be a strong reaction on the part of the socialist camp (i.e., the USSR) were the North to be attacked?) By mid-May, when the United States significantly increased its air-strike capability in the South, the North Vietnamese prepared to absorb bombing attacks. At the time, Hanoi's first major statement indicated awareness that "the Skyraiders introduced into the South are likely to be used in provocations against North Vietnam" and suggested the limited nature of the Communists' retaliatory capability by threatening the Americans only with the punishment "of history" (Nhan Dan editorial of 21 May). Widespread construction of infantry-type defense ditches in the central part of Hanoi was noted by a visitor to the city in early May, suggesting that the Vietnamese were preparing to absorb air strikes even against their capital. Hanoi's second major statement at the time (issued by the DRV Foreign Ministry on 4 June) indicated that countermoves would include primarily a step-up of Viet Cong operations.

The Chinese did not in any way associate themselves publicly with the defense of the North. They spoke only of "friendship" of the PLA and the PAVN and referred vaguely to PLA "support for the Vietnamese people's struggle for reunification" (Lt. General Liu Chih-chien in his speech of 8 June). They apparently were not clear about Washington's intentions. Air strikes in Laos (against Khang Khay) increased their anxiety, which was partly reflected by Chou En-lai's reference to the "dangerous situation in Indochina" and his urgent appeal

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for the "speedy calling" of a Geneva conference on Laos (speech of 11 June). The meeting of American officials in Honolulu in June and the air strikes in Laos may well have led the Chinese leaders to conclude that Washington, by "entering upon a new phase of direct and open" support of anti-Communist forces in Laos (People's Daily editorial of 15 June), was hinting at an intention to strike next at North Vietnam if Pathet Lao and Viet Cong operations did not cease. They kept their deterrent statements imprecise as they met in mid-June in a "work conference of the CCP Central Committee": if Washington wants its "own way, it will find itself woefully unwise in its choice" (Ta Kung Pao editorial of 15 June) and "we want to solemnly warn American imperialism to stop playing with fire at once or it will burn itself" (Ta Kung Pao editorial of 18 June).

The Chinese leaders' effort to deter the United States at the time included (a) a revision of Chou En-lai's appeal for a conference, which was elaborated by Chen Yi to be a conference to seek "first of all" a settlement on Laos and (b) warnings that the appeal was not "a sign of weakness" and that China "absolutely will not sit idly by" while the Geneva accords are torn up and "the flames of war are spread to its side" (speech of 24 June). Chen was careful to sustain Peiping's ambiguity on what it would do to protect North Vietnam from prospective air strikes and what it would do if American marines were sent to Laos.

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While attempting by this maneuver to impede further American commitments to Vientiane and Saigon, they apparently decided--probably during their "work conference" in June--to further encourage Hanoi and the Viet Cong. They declared that Peiping's support for the Communist effort in Laos and Vietnam "will remain unshakable"

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(Kuang-ming Daily article of 20 June). That they continued to view any Soviet statement of deterrence as not essential (and, in the context of the Sino-Soviet dispute, as not desirable) was suggested by an article in the Hong Kong Communist newspaper, Wen Wei Pao, on 23 June. Referring to an article in Pravda on 21 June, which had warned that the USSR would not necessarily support China in the event of an enlarged war, the newspaper declared that this warning would only stimulate the Chinese to support the struggle in Laos and Vietnam in "a more resolute way." Khrushchev may have attempted, during the "work conference" discussions among the Chinese leaders, to deter Peiping from further encouraging Hanoi, implicitly warning the Chinese that they would have no Soviet military or political support in the event of any escalation of the war. This was a costly tactical blunder, as it provided the Chinese with a means to "prove" to the North Vietnamese leaders that Khrushchev was a traitor on the matter of support for the revolutionary struggle of a fraternal country.*

Regarding any expectation by Hanoi of support from Peiping in terms of commitment of PLA troops to the North, such a commitment was not anticipated and was not considered necessary. North Vietnamese statements reflected this situation of non-commitment. For example, Hanoi's first major statement at the time of probable Peiping-Hanoi consultations in late June warned vaguely that if the Americans "directly encroach on the security of the DRV," they will "encounter a proper rebuff," but it did not state who would administer the rebuff or how it would be carried out [redacted]

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[redacted] The definitive North Vietnamese statement of

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*Khrushchev's non-support of Hanoi had made it relatively easy for the Chinese to disparage Moscow by stressing, for example, that Peiping always maintained that "it is an unshirkable proletarian internationalist duty to safeguard the peace and security of the entire socialist camp, to protect all its members from imperialist aggression." (People's Daily editorial of 9 July)

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deterrence in June contained a sharp distinction--apparently worked out by the Chinese and Vietnamese--between who would fight and who would merely support the fight:

...should they rashly venture to attack the North, they would certainly sustain a shameful defeat. And this is because our whole people will resolutely fight back, because the socialist countries and progressive peoples the world over will unreservedly support us, because the American people and their allies too will oppose them (Pham Van Dong's Report to the DRV National Assembly of 27 June).

This distinction was made clearer in Nhan Dan on the same day (27 June) that the premier gave his report. The party newspaper cited a statement made months earlier by General Giap at the special political conference in Hanoi on 28 March 1964: "The PAVN and the people's armed forces stand ready to deal telling blows at the enemy if they recklessly encroach upon the territory, airspace, and territorial waters of the DRV." The newspaper went on to discuss the determination of the "Vietnamese" to hit back at American "encroachments" and did not refer to the Chinese. When the Chinese leaders made their deterrent statement, it was stronger than any Peiping had made previously but was still ambiguous on the matter of PLA intervention:

China and the DRV are fraternal neighbors closely related like the lips and teeth. The Chinese people cannot be expected to look on with folded arms in the face of any aggression /i.e. of any degree or nature/ against the DRV. (Chen Yi)

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The Chinese later realized that they had gone too far [redacted] Chen had used terminology--vague-yet-ominous--which the Chinese at first probably considered suitable to their

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purposes. The word, "any," was repeated when the People's Daily editorial of 9 July reprinted Chen's remarks,* but later in July the Chinese leaders apparently perceived that the word was dangerously inclusive, committing them to some form of action whether an American attack was launched on the ground or in the air. Thus they dropped the word, "any," by the end of July

By late July, the Chinese were acting somewhat bolder than they had in early June--that is, bolder than during the days immediately following the Honolulu conference of American officials. For the first time, they issued a government statement which hinted at the use of the PLA:

Despite the fact that the United States has introduced tens of thousands of its military personnel into southern Vietnam and Laos, China has not sent a single soldier to Indochina. However, there is a limit to everything. (Government Statement of 19 July)**

*The editorial of 9 July made the strongest statement of deterrence up to that time: "Should American imperialism attack the DRV, thereby posing a threat to China's peace and security, the Chinese people naturally cannot be expected to look on with folded arms." Nevertheless, it did not say what the Chinese would do when they unfolded their arms.

**The deterrent aspect of the Chinese government statement of 19 July was suggested by the People's Daily editorial of the 20th, which warned Washington to note the new threat and that "we mean what we say." They also pointed to the new threat as "showing that China has made up its mind, formulated its counter measures, as well as looked into every possible future development." (Hong Kong Wen Wei Pao commentator article of 20 July) This reference to contingency planning probably refers to the mid-June "work conference" of the Chinese leadership and further suggests that the decision to sustain and increase support of Hanoi and the Viet Cong was affirmed at the conference.

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At the same time, they took care to indicate to Washington that only an attack on North Vietnam (apparently a ground attack was meant)--and not action in South Vietnam--would impel Peiping to commit the PLA in Vietnam:

We do not want to wage a war in southeast Asia. This is absolutely clear to the State Department in Washington. This position of ours is very accurately known in the State Department. They know that we do not want to wage war. We would feel threatened only if, perhaps, the United States would send their "special warfare" toward the North, if they attack North Vietnam. That is, if the other side were to attack. This would directly endanger the stability of our border and of the neighboring Chinese provinces. In such a case, we would intervene....

Yet, being encircled by aggressive people on the other side, we have to maintain this army. It would intervene if the war in Indochina should be carried to the North....If they want a small war, then a small war it will be. If they want a big war, then it will be a big war. It all depends on the Americans. (Chen Yi interview in late July with Austrian newsman)

This was the first time that a Chinese leader had publicly discussed the specific conditions which would impel the PLA to "intervene." Peiping probably believed, at that time, that the United States would not strike at the North either on the ground or in the air. An indication of such a belief, as of late July, appeared in the broadcast of a Peiping radio commentator on 27 July: he told listeners in Japan that "China considers" American threats to invade the DRV as merely intended to scare China, inasmuch as the United States "would not be able" to invade. The Soviet leaders also may have believed in mid-July that American attacks on the North were improbable; at the

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time, Soviet officials reportedly downplayed the risks of escalation on the grounds that President Johnson would not let the fighting expand into a local war.

When, in early August, American planes hit North Vietnamese targets following the incident in the Gulf of Tonkin, the Chinese seem to have been taken by surprise. After a 24-hour delay, the Chinese issued their government statement in which they threatened to help but avoided saying that the PLA now had the right to intervene. The statement fell back upon the distinction made by Premier Pham Van Dong on 27 June:

In the surprise attack on the DRV...United States imperialism went over the 'brink of war' and made the first step in extending the war in Indochina....Since the United States has taken this action, the DRV has gained the right of action to fight against aggression, and all the countries upholding the Geneva agreements have gained the right of action to assist the DRV in its fight against aggression...no socialist country can sit idly by without lending a helping hand....

Aggression by the United States against the DRV means aggression against China. The Chinese people will absolutely not sit idly by without lending a helping hand. The American government must stop immediately its armed provocations against the DRV and its armed encroachments on the latter's sacred territory, airspace, and territorial waters. (CPR Government Statement of 6 August)

Thus Pham Van Dong's distinction between those who would "fight" and those who would merely "assist" was clearly and deliberately stressed in the statement and the Chinese made no threat to intervene, demanding only that the United States stop bombing (after, in fact, it had stopped). They tried to conceal their decision not to retaliate by

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shifting this burden to others. For example, they insisted that "The question now is not one of the United States bringing up a 'complaint' against the DRV, but one of the people throughout the world bringing the American imperialist pirates to trial" (People's Daily editorial of 8 August), and asked (in a People's Daily editorial of 9 August) "Will the people of various countries look on with folded arms while American imperialism plays with fire? Absolutely not."

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At the same time that the Chinese warned, "Don't think that you can get away with your surprise attack on the DRV" (People's Daily editorial of 9 August), they specified only that the Vietnamese would reply: "if the American aggressors dare to expand the war... the Vietnamese people, who are noted for their glorious combat traditions, will most assuredly be able to annihilate the United States bandits on their soil" (Liao Cheng-chih in a speech of 9 August).*

* [] the Chinese were anxious to convey to Washington an impression of restraint, almost certainly to deter the United States from considering strikes against the mainland.

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Publicly, Chen Yi later committed only the Vietnamese, not the Chinese, to give a "resolute rebuff" to the United States in the event of more air strikes (statement of 7 September).

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Following the second incident in the Gulf of Tonkin on 18 September, the Chinese again employed a variety of statements which were intended as deterrents, but which avoided indicating any course of retaliatory action in the event of sustained air strikes. Speaking in the language of an interested observer rather than an active participant, PLA Army Chief-of-Staff Lo Jui-ching, stated:

The Chinese people know how to deal with war maniacs. We are closely watching every action of American imperialism to see to what degree it intends to worsen the situation. (Speech of 19 September)

After the crisis of September subsided, the Chinese deterrent statements remained vague, particularly on the matter of a new possible development which the Chinese seemed to see as probable--viz., gradual and phased escalation.

One should realize that if aggression is enlarged regardless under what label--limited or not very limited--this still constitutes an act of war and a brazen attack on the DRV....All big aggressive wars in the world were begun with a limited label....Once an aggressive neck has been stuck out...it must be chopped off. (People's Daily editorial of 29 November)

This line was careful to sustain Peiping's ambiguity on whether the PAVN would be assisted by the PLA in actual combat in the event of any degree of escalation. This ambiguity was not really clarified in the unusual assertion of Liu Ning-yi (speech at solidarity conference in Hanoi given on 27 November) that the Chinese people will always "fight" with the Vietnamese people. This formulation did not make clear whether "fight" was to mean joint military operations (combat) or merely joint political struggle.

Hanoi was clearly aware of this carefully cultivated ambiguity in the Chinese position. Regarding Chinese

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behavior following the August 1964 American air strikes, a North Vietnamese official told [] in early November that "When the Americans attacked the DRV, the Soviets did nothing and the Chinese only talked."* In a published interview in December, Ho Chi Minh suggested that North Vietnam would have to fight alone in the event of escalation. He was careful to say that if the war were expanded to the North, "the CPR will support us and the socialist countries will support us" (reported by Vietnam News Agency on 23 December). At the same time, the Chinese continued to make their usual distinction between supporting North Vietnam and fighting with it. Peiping declared that if South Korean troops were sent to South Vietnam, this would provide all Geneva accords countries the full right "to support" the South Vietnamese (People's Daily editorial of 14 January 1965). Mao Tse-tung himself spoke even more cautiously of the conditions which would compel the Chinese to engage in military operations in Vietnam. He told Edgar Snow on 9 January that "Only if the United States attacked China would the Chinese fight....The Vietnamese can cope with their own situation."

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Hanoi put limits on its own reaction. The North Vietnamese reaction to the air strikes of 7 and 8 February 1965 was marked by an apparent anxiety to dispel the notion in the North and elsewhere that Hanoi was obliged to hit back with the full force of the PAVN across the 17th parallel. The DRV government statement of 8 February

*In the fall of 1964, the North Vietnamese began to speak less optimistically about a victory in the South within a few years, and to foresee a longer period. []

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declared that the enemy had been "appropriately punished," and it made no mention of the need to retaliate in reprisal for damage inflicted by the strikes on the North. The 7 February appeal of the Liberation Front presidium for forces in the South to "strike strongly, really strongly, and really lastingly, in order to protect the North and to liberate the South" suggested that Hanoi's policy was to react by retaliating on a large scale with its military assets in the South rather than preparing for a major PAVN offensive. Hanoi depicted the air strikes as part of an established pattern rather than making a new pattern. By implication, therefore, no major new counter-action directly from the North was required. "Well-deserved" retaliation from the North took the form of bringing down American strike aircraft (Nhan Dan editorial of 13 February). Hanoi declared only that the "South Vietnamese people have the right to strike back." (PAVN regional military commander to NCNA on 11 February)

Peiping, however, seems to have been anxious to go beyond the question of the right of the Viet Cong to that of the DRV itself--i.e., to that of the use of the PAVN.

...the DRV has secured the right to take the initiative in dealing counterblows to the South Vietnamese puppets. The United States government should be reminded that it is the United States which has invaded South Vietnam in violation of the Geneva agreements and which has now further taken the lead in breaking up the line of demarcation between southern and northern Vietnam. Do you seriously think that you alone are allowed to do so while others are not? (CPR government statement of 13 February)

This new language suggests that in February 1965 the Chinese leaders were urging Hanoi to increase drastically the number of regular PAVN units in the South, apparently by a large-scale attack across the 17th parallel. Hanoi's propaganda media carried the text of this Chinese government statement, but the Vietnam News Agency summary omitted the theme of initiating counterblows, and the

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DRV government statement of 14 February did not mention any DRV right to take such action. By contrast, the People's Daily and Ta Kung Pao editorials of 14 February repeated the theme, as did the People's Daily editorial published on the 19th. The Chinese position was probably intended also to keep the burden of retaliation on the North Vietnamese--that is, on Hanoi's side of the Sino-Vietnamese border; at the same time, the Chinese tried to avoid the appearance of an inactive partner and stated--to the United States--that "We are waiting for you in battle array" (People's Daily editorial of 9 February). This statement did not quite focus on the situation at the time, as the United States was striking North Vietnam, not China, and was doing so in the air, not on the ground.

The Chinese leaders tried to dispel the impression in various countries that Peiping feared the consequences of a direct military confrontation with United States forces. They and their followers tried to justify their inability to deter air strikes against the North and their unwillingness to act militarily. One line taken was that Peiping refused to be lured into fighting at a disadvantage. An editorial in the Cambodian paper, La Depeche (a daily which strongly supports Chinese positions), replying on 9 February to "those who say that the Chinese are contented with giving only verbal support," argued that Peiping "must not commit itself," but must prepare for a confrontation "under the best of all possible conditions." The Chinese leaders themselves revived the formulation of 6 August 1964 that Geneva signatories had gained the right to "assist" the DRV and again resorted to meticulous ambiguity: "as to how this right will be exercised, it is our own affair" (CPR government statement of 9 February). They avoided the question of what the PLA would be ordered to do in response to the early February strikes: "If American imperialism is bent on spreading the war flames and imposing war on us, then we shall have no alternative but to go along with it to the very end. In that event, the whole of southeast Asia, the whole of Asia, would be aflame with the revolutionary fire in which you will be so burnt to death that not even your ashes would be traceable" (People's Daily editorial

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of 10 February). This statement was vague precisely at points where precision was easy to employ. That is, it referred to "imposing war on us" and then failed to make clear whether "us" referred to China only or to China and North Vietnam together. At the same time, it dodged the real issue: a commitment to act militarily to counter air strikes against the North. Further, to state that "an invasion of the DRV is an invasion of the CPR" and then to make the entire matter conditional--e.g., "If you insist on imposing war on us, heavy rebuffs are in store for you" (People's Daily editorial of 9 February)--was to make no commitment to use the PLA in defense of the North against air strikes. Peiping seemed to be saying something else: that an American ground attack against the North, if large enough to threaten the PAVN with defeat (as the North Koreans had been threatened in autumn 1950), would lead the PLA to intervene. (It was not necessarily saying that the PLA would intervene in Vietnam if the U.S. were to make air strikes on China.) But a U.S. ground attack on the North was hardly a real possibility; it was a hypothetical situation regarding which Chinese statements could be made to sound bold. "You will become utterly helpless when people resisting aggression, instead of being afraid of you, dare to fight, defy difficulties, and advance wave on wave. You have been taught a lesson on this score in the Korean War. Do you want to have the lesson repeated in Indochina?" (CPR government statement of 13 February)

In short, the Chinese commitment--or hedged promise--was most nearly explicit on the development least likely to occur--a major American ground attack against the North (or China). Regarding the real military situation in February, the Chinese in effect conceded that the air strike strategy against the North could not be halted by their prolonged verbal deterrent effort. They also implicitly conceded that the strikes were a significant American initiative which deprived the North Vietnamese of sanctuary. Reflecting a considerable degree of sensitivity to their inability and unwillingness to try to stop the air strikes, the Chinese declared: "How far will you go? That's your own lookout. But you are grossly mistaken to think that the war can be made to

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develop as you wish" (People's Daily editorial of 19 February). Explicitly disparaging American air strike capability based on carrier strength in the Gulf of Tonkin and implicitly underscoring PAVN ground strength, the Chinese pointed to the "airdromes on the sea" and asked "What can they do since the outcome of the war has to be decided on terra firma?" (People's Daily editorial of 19 February). That is, the Chinese were compelled to fall back to the position that the PAVN would not permit the "outcome" of the war to be defeat on the ground for Hanoi; but this did not alter the fact that the North was being subjected to bombing.

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The Chinese leaders' reaction to the air strikes of 2 March seemed intended partly to encourage again the North Vietnamese to send more PAVN units to the South and partly to deter further attacks. Regarding encouragement of Hanoi, Peiping stressed explicitly the line that the United States had again "stepped over the boundary" of the 17th parallel and spoke of retaliation in terms of a strike back, apparently from the North (People's Daily editorial of 3 March). The North Vietnamese, however, stressed the theme that the DRV anti-aircraft artillery had given the Americans an "appropriate answer" and that the Viet Cong, too, had "answered" and would answer them with more military victories in the South (Nhan Dan editorial of 5 March). Although their 3 and 5 March editorials mentioned "punishing" the Americans, they did not do so in the context of widening the conflict. Yet this is precisely the context in which the Chinese discussed striking back, downplaying Hanoi's theme of punishment by anti-aircraft artillery in the North:

Having flagrantly resorted to the war move of bombing the DRV again and again, the Johnson administration said in its statement that the United States 'wishes to avoid widening the conflict.' What does

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this mean? It means in fact that the United States is free to bomb any place at will while others should never strike back; otherwise, they would be 'widening the conflict.' What nonsense! What gangsters' logic! 'It is discourteous not to give after receiving,' a Chinese saying goes. Since American imperialism has forced the war upon others, it cannot expect to escape the punishment it deserves. (People's Daily editorial of 3 March)

This line of argument, which gratuitously provided the North Vietnamese leaders with a basis for PAVN retaliation, seemed to be intended to urge Hanoi to act on a larger scale as well as to accelerate the overall Viet Cong effort. That the Chinese were urging a course of large-scale PAVN entry into the fighting was further suggested by the line of argument carried earlier in a Red Flag article dealing with the war in Vietnam:

The American imperialists have extended the war to the DRV. The DRV, therefore, is fully allowed to use every possible means to deal telling blows to them and their lackeys. (Red Flag "Commentator" article of 27 February)

This article was not intended merely as justification of the war to neutral and other non-Communist leaders. It was broadcast in Vietnamese, and only in Vietnamese, to Vietnam six times on 2 March, strongly suggesting the Chinese leaders' intention to impel Hanoi--"the DRV is fully allowed"--to make a significantly greater military commitment and to accelerate the effort in the South.

At the same time, the Chinese offered support for such an accelerated effort. Politburo member Peng Chen declared that the Chinese people "have made every preparation and resolutely support the Vietnamese people in launching counterattacks for self-defense in various ways against the American aggressors" (speech of 5 March).

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The Chinese also insisted that the North Vietnamese should by no means maneuver for negotiations as a means of gaining a suspension of air attacks. Particularly in the wake of Kosygin's visit to Hanoi, the Chinese declared--in the context of possible "peace talks"--that "We shall never succumb to the American imperialists' blackmail. No socialist country should" (People's Daily editorial of 1 March); that the United States is trying "to gain at the negotiating table what it is unable to gain on the battlefield" (Red Flag article of 27 February, broadcast in Vietnamese to Vietnam on 2 March); and that "Vietnam will not agree, nor will all countries which truly uphold the Geneva agreements" (CPR government statement of 2 March). By contrast, Hanoi was more equivocal on the matter of negotiations in early March, did not directly attack the idea, and deleted the phrase, "Vietnam will not agree," from the Vietnam News Agency account of Peiping's statement.

Regarding Peiping's deterrent effort in early March,

these statements contained elements of ambiguity. For example, an "important" Chinese official told a Japanese correspondent in Peiping on 2 March that

I do not think the United States will be able to carry out bombings on a larger scale, but if it should take a chance, China would strike the United States with real action. (Tokyo Nihon Keizai, 3 March)

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3. To Deter the United States from Air Strikes
Against China

Following the early February air strikes, the Chinese leaders apparently became more aware of a real danger of strikes against their own bases than they had been since August 1964. Cutting directly across the bold talk of preparation to take "real action" was the not so bold move to disarm a pre-emptive American air strike on bases in south China by privately indicating (to Washington through a third party) that PLA ground forces were not massed on the southern border. Immediately following the air strikes of 7-11 February on the North, Peiping's Foreign Ministry arranged a visit to the Sino-Vietnamese border area by the China-based correspondent of AFP; he was told by a Chinese official in Kunming that the visit was intended to demonstrate that Peiping was not preparing for direct intervention. Apparently as intended, the correspondent reported to American officials that he saw no military activity in the area. Although insisting publicly on 12 March that American threats ("no sanctuary" and "hot pursuit") to bomb China could not frighten Peiping, the Chinese leaders in effect admitted their inability to prevent the bombings of North Vietnam from extending throughout the DRV and eventually to south China. They implicitly conceded that the United States had unlimited capability to bomb, but downplayed the military significance of bombing:

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Anyhow, you have only so much armed strength at your disposal, and for all your clamoring, the means you can resort to are only that many.

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You may act in your way and we will act
in our way. (CPR government statement
of 12 March)*

The Chinese leaders were also impelled to downplay the military significance of the landing of American marines at Da Nang. By arguing in their statement of 12 March that the marines' presence would "educate" the South Vietnamese by "negative example" and that "no village, town, forest or road in the whole of southern Vietnam is safe," the Chinese introduced another line of justification for limiting their response to support, falling short of use of the PLA in Vietnam. The apparent logic was: if American force-increases do not basically change Viet Cong capabilities and prospects, Chinese military intervention is not required. "How can 3,500 men save the aggressors from defeat in war?" (CPR government statement of 12 March) The argument was also intended, of course, to buoy up North Vietnamese and Viet Cong morale.

By warning, in the context of non-intervention, that the United States had "embarked on the path of a Korean-type war" (CPR government statement of 12 March), the Chinese further reduced the deterrent value of the Korean War analogy. And by using the analogy in another context--namely, in deploying South Korean troops to Vietnam, the United States "has gone farther down the path of fighting a Korean-type war" (People's Daily article of 18 March)--while threatening no countermeasures,

*Later, in May, the Chinese explicitly contrasted American air and naval power with Communist capability on the ground, declaring that "American naval and air superiority" is no match for "revolutionary war" on the ground and "That is why we say, the enemy may fight in the way it chooses, but we fight in our way." (People's Daily editorial of 7 May This was an indirect admission that Hanoi and Peiping did not have the capability to prevent the air strikes.

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Peiping further weakened it.* Actually, in the apparent Chinese view, the PLA would be used to act on the analogy only if American ground forces moved across the 17th parallel, defeating PAVN units and continuing to advance northward. On this point, Edgar Snow in April reported the "thinking of the Chinese leaders" as follows: "Only after repeated warnings were Chinese volunteers sent into the Korean War. They did not intervene until the transportation and communications networks across the Yalu River began to be bombed." Snow's distortion on the matter of bombed networks across the Yalu--if the distortion came from the Chinese--would weaken the analogy to the point of implying that China in this case would not intervene unless China itself were attacked. While it seems doubtful that the Chinese were trying to encourage this impression (as they were taking a different line in other interviews in the same period), Snow seemed to be saying, at the least, that Peiping would not consider air strikes against North Vietnam a sufficient reason for PLA intervention. (His views were set forth in an article in the Tokyo Sekai, #4, April 1965.)**

Regarding the matter of "volunteers," in the context of air attacks on the North, Chinese pledges to send them had political-psychological value--primarily for Chinese prestige, pressure on neutrals, and popular morale in the North--but had no military meaning. Although

*This weakening process had been accelerated by use of the analogy in Chinese statements published on 13 February and 4 March following the early February and early March air strikes on the North.

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the early and mid-March air strikes spurred Hanoi to publicize offers of the Russians, Chinese, Cubans, and others to send volunteers "to fight beside their Vietnamese comrades" (Nhan Dan editorial of 17 March), the North Vietnamese leaders almost certainly viewed these publicized offers as having no real deterrent value. In mid-March, Chou En-lai in effect admitted this, ruling out PLA intervention by alluding to DRV self-reliance. Replying to a French correspondent's question regarding air bombardment of the North Vietnamese, Chou said: "In the first place, they can defend themselves." Hanoi itself declared self-reliance the real Vietnamese Communist policy on military manpower, and voluntary enlistment of Vietnamese was depicted in the 14 and 17 March Nhan Dan editorials as providing the necessary fighting and reserve force for the PAVN. When, therefore, Hanoi's Council of Ministers' meeting on 4 April stressed self-reliance in fighting, it was merely formalizing the fact that Vietnamese Communists were fighting and would fight alone in the war's then-current phase.

Regarding the matter of large-scale PAVN troop movements into the South--a policy Peiping apparently preferred--Hanoi tried to dispel the impression abroad that it would retaliate against the mid-March strikes by taking such radical military action. The North Vietnamese leaders probably believed at the time that a large-scale--rather than piecemeal--PAVN movement across the 17th parallel would spur the United States into launching massive air strikes against all targets in the North. When Hanoi broadcast the 22 March Liberation Front statement, which appealed for support from the North, it changed the key sentence to a more restrained and contingent warning--i.e., from "we will call" to "we will have to call in case of need" on those southerners sent North in 1954. Similarly, when it had called a few days earlier on PAVN forces to defend the country "in coordination with the liberation forces" in the South (Nhan Dan editorial of 16 March), the context had suggested

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that the PAVN would defend the North and the Viet Cong would "defend" the South.* By stressing North-South "coordination," Hanoi in these statements seemed to be sidestepping the major issue--that is, whether to launch a large-scale retaliatory attack southward--and insisting instead that Viet Cong operations in the South (such as the bombing of the American embassy in Saigon) was a coordinated and appropriate response to air strikes against the North.

Peiping's prestige was damaged by the March air strikes. These strikes destroyed the concept of a sanctuary and forced them to recognize that Mao was wrong in thinking that small wars could be fought with only slight risks to the base areas and to the security of other bloc countries. The Chinese were compelled to fall back on the argument that the United States would not win the final victory. They were also compelled to screen their military inaction behind a cloud of words, which included the unprecedented pledge to send men to fight in the South. This pledge was made in response to the Liberation Front's 22 March appeal with an eye to (a) recouping setbacks in Peiping's prestige, (b) competing with Moscow on the matter of willingness to send volunteers, and (c) preventing further increases

*The sentence made the North-South distinction in the following way: "Fighting in coordination with the liberation forces and people in the South, let our armed forces and people in the North always stand ready, uphold the spirit of daring to fight and to win, and deal the American pirates still heavier blows to defend the life and property of our people and the airspace, territorial waters, and territory of our country."

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of American (or anti-Communist) ground forces in the South.* However, the pledge was hedged. China is "ready to send our men, whenever the South Vietnamese people want them, to fight together with the South Vietnamese people to annihilate the American aggressors" (People's Daily editorial of 25 March). Chen Yi and Chou En-lai used the same hedge--i.e., whenever wanted--on 28 and 29 March respectively. In the 25 March editorial, Peiping was careful to distinguish between the fact that the Viet Cong had already called for "aid, including arms and all other war materials" (and were in fact receiving such aid) and the fact that they had not yet called for fighting men. That is, the Chinese in effect told Washington that their real position was not to commit PLA forces to fight in Vietnam at that time.**

The Chinese leaders hoped to deter the United States from striking by air at China by making it easy for

*Sensitivity to Peiping's inaction and setbacks in prestige was also reflected in (a) a pro-Communist newspaper's appeal to readers in Hong Kong to send letters to the editor to refute local Chinese Nationalist claims that Chinese, not Americans, are the real "paper tigers" (Wen Wei Pao editorial of 14 April) and (b) Peng Chen's use of a hard adjective--e.g., China is "willing to take emergency action" to force the Americans out of Vietnam (speech of 18 April). But Peng was ambiguous on the precise nature of that "emergency action." His remark, made at a time when the delegation led by Le Duan was in Moscow, was primarily intended to regain some ground lost to Moscow as the Soviet pressed their post-Khrushchev effort to increase influence with the North Vietnamese leaders.

**Regarding the matter of negotiations, the 25 March editorial suggested that the Chinese also intended their position to serve as a means of applying more pressure on Hanoi to adopt a stand--against negotiations--similar in degree of harshness to that of the Front and Peiping.

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Washington to read the hedge in their position on the matter of sending volunteers. That they were anxious to make this clear to Washington is suggested by (a) Chen Yi's 15 March statement.

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[redacted] that China did not intend to intervene militarily in Vietnam so long as Hanoi did not request China to do so and (b) the story given [redacted] in Peiping on 25 March--that is, on the same day that Peiping published its bold-appearing but substantively-weak editorial on volunteers.

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[redacted] the time not yet ripe for sending PLA forces to North Vietnam or to the South, that Viet Cong forces would first be strengthened by regrouped southerners, that after Hanoi and Haiphong had been bombed and the North had suffered considerable damage, PAVN forces might cross the demarcation line and strike at American bases in the South, and that only if, at some future time, there were fear that American ground forces would sweep the whole of Vietnam (including the North), China would intervene with PLA units. These signals to Washington from Peiping that the PLA would not be used in Vietnam except in a remote contingency were published at a time when the Chinese seemed intent primarily on deterring further American strikes against North Vietnam. They thus contradicted the ostensible intent. It is probable, therefore, that Peiping was more concerned at the time with deterring the United States from striking at bases in China--and was implicitly arguing to this end that since the PLA is not building up, a pre-emptive American air strike is unnecessary.

This increased concern about possible strikes against Chinese bases was expressed in various ways. For example, a Peiping government statement of 12 March declared that American threats to bomb China would not frighten Peiping;

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[redacted] a People's Daily editorial of 29 March stated that after attacking South and North Vietnam, Washington's "next step will be aggression against China;" Chen Yi told [redacted] on 31 March that an attack on China might come at any time,

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and that China was preparing its defenses;

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The 9 April attack of Chinese Communist MIG aircraft on American Navy aircraft southwest of Hainan probably was intended as a warning to Washington and further reflected Peiping's real concern that the mainland, or at least Hainan, might be hit by American (or Chinese Nationalist) air and naval strikes.

The shift to increased concern occurred roughly at the time when, in March, the Chinese leaders were made clearly aware that their effort to deter strikes against the North had failed. They believed that these strikes would be sustained and even expanded. Central Committee member, Liao Cheng-chih, for example, was quoted on the air strikes by the Japanese correspondent in Peiping:

In order to accomplish a revolution, they must bear even their own country's being ruined. (Tokyo Shimbun of 26 March, based on a telephone conversation between the paper's main office and its correspondent in Peiping on 25 March)

On 31 March, the Chinese again hinted at their view that the deterrence effort had failed and they could not prevent further American air attacks on the North. They declared that the Viet Cong would punish the United States "no matter how many bombs it may dump on North Vietnam" (People's Daily "Commentator" article of 31 March published following the bombing of the American embassy in Saigon). At a time when North Vietnamese targets were subjected to air attacks and when the Chinese leaders in effect were telling the North Vietnamese leaders that these strikes must be absorbed, the Chinese cast about for a plausible line to justify their encouragement of Hanoi to face even national destruction. Partly to justify the sacrificial course they were urging upon the Vietnamese and partly in response to Secretary Rusk's 3 May remark on the possibility of suspending bombing, the Chinese leaders discussed more openly than before the

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prospect of American strikes against the mainland. Publicly, they pressed forward along the line that Peiping would support the war in Vietnam even if China, too, were to be bombed. The Chinese in this way hoped to add weight to their argument that Hanoi should not accept negotiations in return for a suspension of bombing.

Further, the Chinese leaders hoped to indicate to Washington the futility of any future course which envisaged various degrees of bombing the mainland of China. Marshal Ho Lung declared that Peiping would support the war in the South "no matter how great the cost and sacrifice" (speech of 7 May at the East German embassy); Lo Jui-ching wrote that Peiping would help the Vietnamese "to the limit of our capabilities" even if the United States "enlarges the war" (Red Flag article of 10 May); and "Observer" wrote that support would continue "whether you bomb China or not....We have taken into full account every war venture you may possibly launch and made adequate preparations to meet it" (People's Daily article of 12 May). The latter statement about preparations strongly suggested air defense precautions.

As they prepared for the prospect of air strikes against the mainland (adopting the strategy of expecting the worst development),* they also indicated that they

*Lo Jui-ching wrote that "preparations must envisage the use by imperialists of nuclear weapons as well as conventional weapons" and went on to claim that the United States was converting the war into "a local war of the Korean type" (Red Flag article of 10 May). The People's Daily editorial of 14 May also claimed that special war was being expanded into regional war. This emphasis conflicts with the CCP doctrinal position that small wars can be confined and contrasts with that of 1961-62, when Chinese materials stressed the small-scale, "special warfare" nature of the fighting (see footnote on page 4). The change in Peiping's appraisal of the extent of the war reflects their awareness that not only North Vietnam, but also China has been denied the "right" of indefinite sanctuary.

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preferred not to initiate a Sino-American clash. Lo Jui-ching laid it down that "Our principle is: We will not attack unless we are attacked. If we are attacked, we will certainly counterattack." (Red Flag article of 10 May, in which Lo suggests that the Vietnamese can handle the fighting alone)

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Regarding the strategy of the war in the South, the Chinese apparently continued to press Hanoi to accelerate the introduction of regular PAVN units into the fighting. The Chinese seem to have responded to the air strikes of early February and March by encouraging Hanoi to move PAVN forces on a large-scale across the 17th parallel. In early June, they again urged Hanoi:

All the Vietnamese people, including the people of North Vietnam, have acquired the right to exert their utmost to hit back...the 17th parallel provisional military demarcation line ceases to exist and the people in North Vietnam cease to be restricted in giving support to their fellow countrymen in the South. (People's Daily "Observer" article of 1 June)

Unlike its February reaction, Hanoi did not delete this passage from the domestic broadcasts of the "Observer" article which were beamed on 3 June. This suggests that the North Vietnamese leaders may be willing to infiltrate a few more PAVN units to fight in the South. However, as for PLA action, "Observer" treated the matter with caution. "The Chinese people have the right to do all in their power to aid the Vietnamese people in counter-attacking." Further, on 29 May, Chen Yi had been quoted in People's Daily as telling a French correspondent that the Vietnamese "are perfectly capable of driving the American aggressors out of their country by relying on their own forces." This is obviously the Chinese leaders' preferred course in Vietnam.

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